



*Dedicated to the appreciation of wildlife*

Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge Association  
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Elk Grove, CA 95767

Via email: [delores@water.ca.gov](mailto:delores@water.ca.gov)

Ms. Delores Brown,  
Chief, Office of Environmental Compliance  
Department of Water Resources,  
P. O. Box 942836  
Sacramento, CA 94236

Dear Ms. Brown:

This letter provides the comments of the Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge Association (Association) on the Notice of Preparation (NOP) for the joint Environmental Impact Report (EIR)/Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Sacramento-San Joaquin Bay Delta Conservation Plan (BDCP). The Association is a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving and protecting the Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge (Stone Lakes NWR), which is located within the legal Delta. Among other activities, the Association has worked to ensure that Stone Lakes NWR is protected from adverse impacts relating to changes in flows and water quality due to surrounding development in coordination with local, state and federal agencies.

The Refuge is the single largest complex of natural wetlands, lakes and riparian areas remaining in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, and provides critical habitat for waterfowl and other migratory birds of international concern, as well as a number of endangered plant and animal species. Stone Lakes NWR and its surrounding agricultural areas are home to several special status species, including the tri-colored blackbird, greater sandhill crane, white-face ibis, long-billed curlew, Swainson's hawk, burrowing owl, giant garter snake and valley elderberry longhorn beetle.

Please consult the "Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment for the Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge", available at [http://library.fws.gov/CCPs/stonelakes\\_draft.pdf](http://library.fws.gov/CCPs/stonelakes_draft.pdf) for specific information regarding Stone Lakes NWR resources and as a potential resource in developing the content of the EIR/EIS.

## Background

In 1972, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers recommended establishing a national wildlife refuge in the Stone Lakes Basin after completing a flood control study of Morrison Creek, Sacramento County's largest creek system. In 1994, following six years of study and public meetings, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service ("FWS") established Stone Lakes NWR in Sacramento County, which borders the City of Elk Grove. Stone Lakes NWR is the 505th refuge in the National Wildlife Refuge System and one of the few urban wildlife refuges in the nation. Due primarily to encroaching urban uses, the Refuge has been designated as one of the six most threatened refuges in the nation. (See Exhibit A, *State of the System: An Annual Report on the Threats to the National Wildlife System*, National Wildlife Refuge Association (2005), at p. 9, available at: <http://refugenet.org/new-pdf-files/BeyondtheBoundaries.pdf> see also [http://library.fws.gov/CCPs/stonelakes\\_draft.pdf](http://library.fws.gov/CCPs/stonelakes_draft.pdf).) Changes to the manner in which state and federal water projects make water deliveries to exporters of water otherwise destined for the Delta also have the ability to adversely impact the resources of Stone Lakes NWR.

## General Comments

The Association requests that the proponents of the BDCP carefully consider impacts of implementing the BDCP on the resources of the Refuge in the EIS/EIR. Specifically, impacts of alternative conservation actions including improved water conveyance infrastructure in the Delta must be considered. It is the Association's understanding that the dual and isolated conveyance system routes being considered as part of improved conveyance infrastructure would traverse Stone Lakes NWR lands. This could have very significant impacts on the habitat values of the Stone Lakes NWR.

The Association has also reviewed a Habitat and Operations Technical Team handout that mentions possible inundation of Stone Lakes Bypass for 45 days or more as a possible long term scenario. The environmental impacts of this or other possible uses of Stone Lakes NWR must be carefully evaluated. Such an evaluation would include consideration of drainage-related impacts already occurring as a result of increasing runoff from the growing City of Elk Grove. While more water can at time create environmental benefits, prolonged flooding can also cause trees to die and cause other impacts.

The significant public investments that made the Refuge possible should be honored by providing the very highest level of protection to the resources of Stone Lakes NWR.

### Specific Suggestions

The Association recommends that the EIR/EIS address the following issues:

1. **Establish Appropriate Project Objectives.** A project objective relating specifically to the protection of sensitive publicly owned biological resources within the Delta should be included in the EIS/EIR.
2. **Include a Complete Project Setting.** The environmental setting in the EIR/EIS must include a detailed description of Stone Lakes NWR and other similar resources within the Delta.
3. **Clearly Delineate the Proposed Location of Project Alternatives Involving Conveyance Systems.** The impacts analysis should be based on a specific location for the alternatives involving freshwater conveyance systems. The Association and Stone Lakes NWR Staff are available to assist in identifying and/or refining the possible locations for the conveyance system.
4. **Analyze Impacts on Refuge Specifically.** Impacts analysis in the EIR/EIS should examine how each alternative would affect the resources of Stone Lakes NWR. Also, specialized biological expertise should be engaged to assess impacts on Refuge biota.
5. **Include Feasible Alternatives to Minimize or Avoid Significant Impacts of the Project.** To the extent significant impacts to the resources of Stone Lakes NWR are identified feasible mitigation measures and alternatives must be identified and adopted to reduce those impacts.

### Conclusion

The Association feels strongly that whatever option the BDCP ultimately pursues to address the species issues associated with Delta water exports not degrade Stone Lakes NWR, which is already a threatened resource. Please contact me if you have any questions regarding the information contained in this letter or

would like to obtain more information about Stone Lakes NWR for purposes of drafting the EIR/EIS.

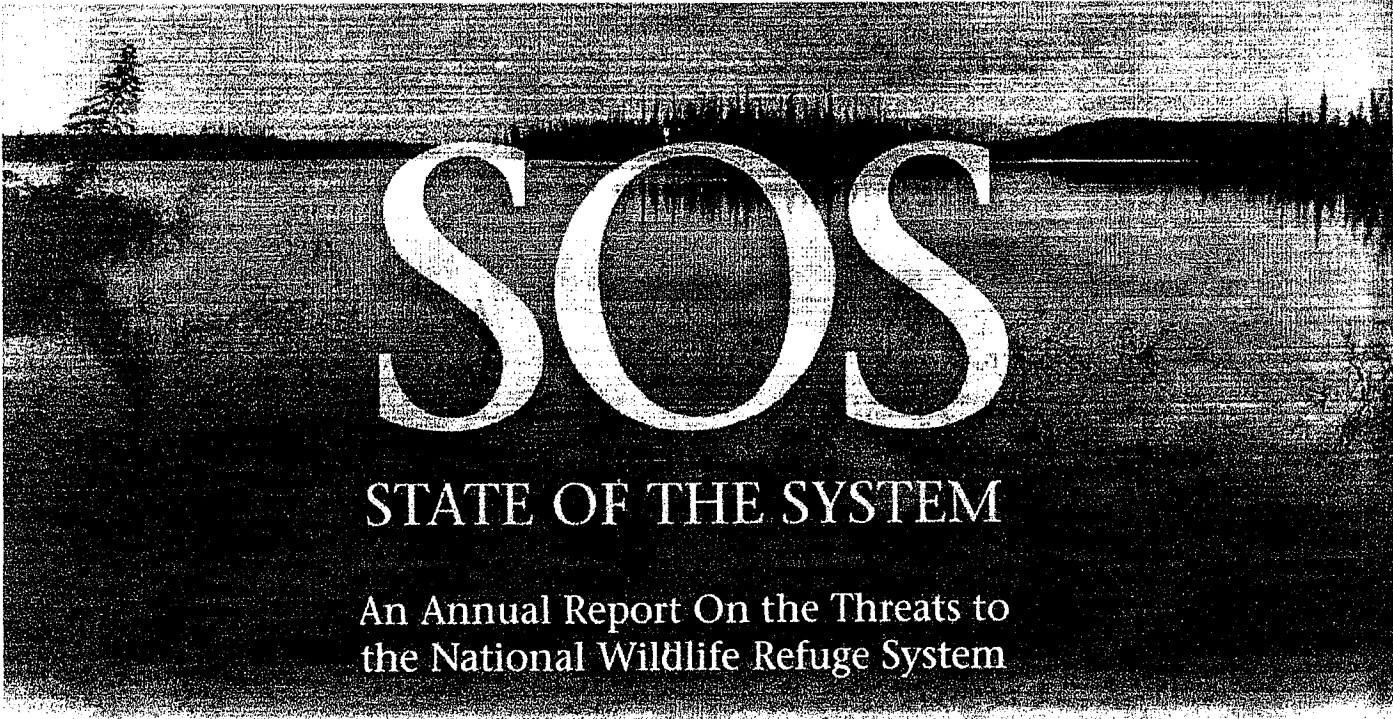
Very truly yours,



Robert Burness  
Watershed Chair

cc:

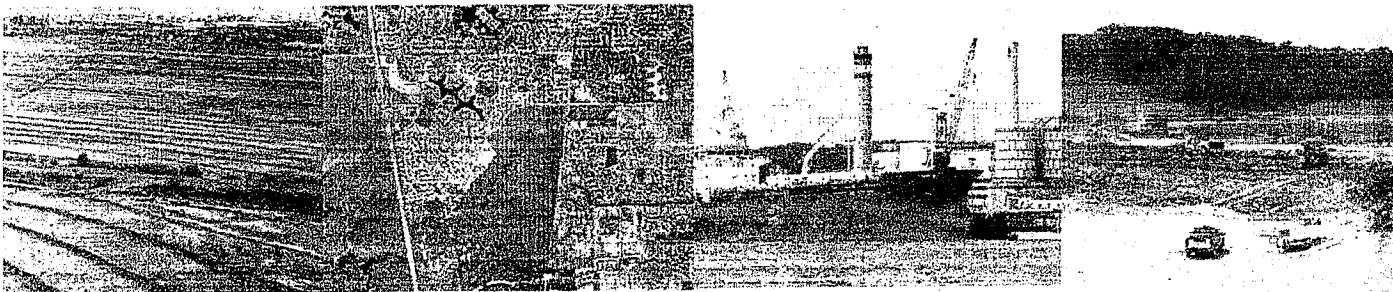
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# SOS

## STATE OF THE SYSTEM

An Annual Report On the Threats to  
the National Wildlife Refuge System



2005 FOCUS:

## Beyond the Boundaries

*Featuring the top six threatened and top six rescued refuges*

Unless we act now to protect lands and waters  
surrounding our nation's refuges,  
we may lose our magnificent wildlife heritage





The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) is to protect, enhance and expand the National Wildlife Refuge System, lands and waters set aside by the American people to protect our diverse wildlife heritage.

The NWRA works with decision-makers in Washington, DC, to help the Refuge System better fulfill its wildlife conservation mission. We promote community support for refuges by providing the more than 160 refuge Friends volunteer organizations with the tools, information and resources to make a difference. And we work to educate the public about the importance of protecting Teddy Roosevelt's unique conservation legacy.

Our diverse national membership includes current and retired U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service professionals, members of refuge Friends organizations, refuge volunteers and other conservation-minded citizens.

To learn more about the NWRA or become a member, please visit our website at [www.refugenet.org](http://www.refugenet.org), or write:

National Wildlife Refuge Association  
1010 Wisconsin Avenue, NW  
Suite 200  
Washington, DC 20007

COVER PHOTOS: TOP AND BOTTOM: BY EVAN HIRSCH. CENTER FROM LEFT: 1. LANICA KLEIN, 2. USFWS, 3. PAMELA HUDSON, 4. DAVID CARRUTH

# SOS

STATE OF THE SYSTEM

## Beyond the Boundaries

Our National Wildlife Refuge System is under siege. While refuge professionals and tens of thousands of refuge volunteers and more than 160 Friends groups work to ensure that each of the 545 refuges across the country is managed to secure the needs of America's wildlife, threats from beyond refuge borders—inappropri-

ate development, competing water interests, mining and fossil fuels extraction, military maneuvers and other harmful activities—threaten to jeopardize the very future of these conservation gems.

This report highlights recent research that reveals the magnitude of these threats, and uses stories from six individual refuges to tell the story. In addition, we review six refuges that have turned threats into opportunity; refuges that are now better off having developed creative partnerships with adjacent landowners and galvanized the support of surrounding communities.

Finally, we offer five recommendations to Congress and the Bush Administration that, while strengthening the conservation mission of our national wildlife refuges, aid in the broader conservation of species on private, state and other federal lands, a vital requirement if we are to conserve our wildlife heritage for the benefit of future generations of Americans.

*The National Wildlife Refuge Association urges Congress and the Administration to implement or support the following measures to ensure the long-term integrity of our national wildlife refuges:*

- 1) Strengthen incentives for private landowners to practice conservation through more funding of federal programs that reward landowners for habitat protection.
- 2) In partnership with states and private landowners, conduct a thorough evaluation of habitat conservation needs on lands and waters that are adjacent to refuges and that connect refuges and other conservation areas.
- 3) Allocate adequate funding for direct land purchase to add high-priority habitat to the Refuge System.
- 4) Allocate adequate funding for state wildlife grants which will help to conserve important wildlife habitat outside refuge boundaries: at least \$85 million next year.
- 5) Implement strategies to protect fragile coastal and island refuges from the devastation of shipwrecks and oil spills.

Please see the closing section of this report for more information.

### *2005's Top 6 Threatened Refuges*

Stone Lakes NWR, CA .....	9
Alaska Maritime NWR, AK .....	10
Desert NWR Complex, NV .....	11
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### *2005's Top 6 Rescued Refuges*

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## Refuge at the Crossroads

# Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge

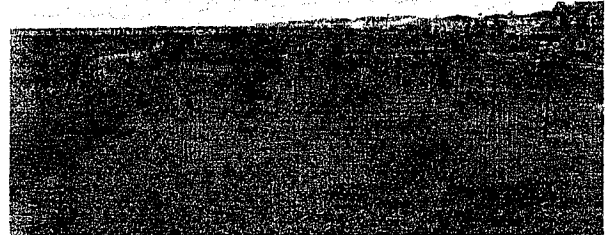
Near Sacramento, California

Current area: 6,200 acres

Authorized final area: 17,600 acres

6,000 visitors annually

Located in the San Joaquin-Sacramento Delta and the 100-year floodplain, the Stone Lakes NWR provides vital feeding and resting grounds for migratory birds on the Pacific Flyway and protects habitats that are rapidly disappearing in California's Central Valley: grasslands, wetlands, riparian, oak forest, and agricultural lands. In the 10 years since the refuge was established, nearby Sacramento and its surrounding counties have grown at staggering rates—up to 20 percent annually. As what was once open country around the refuge lands fills with tract houses and strip malls, Stone Lakes NWR is struggling to



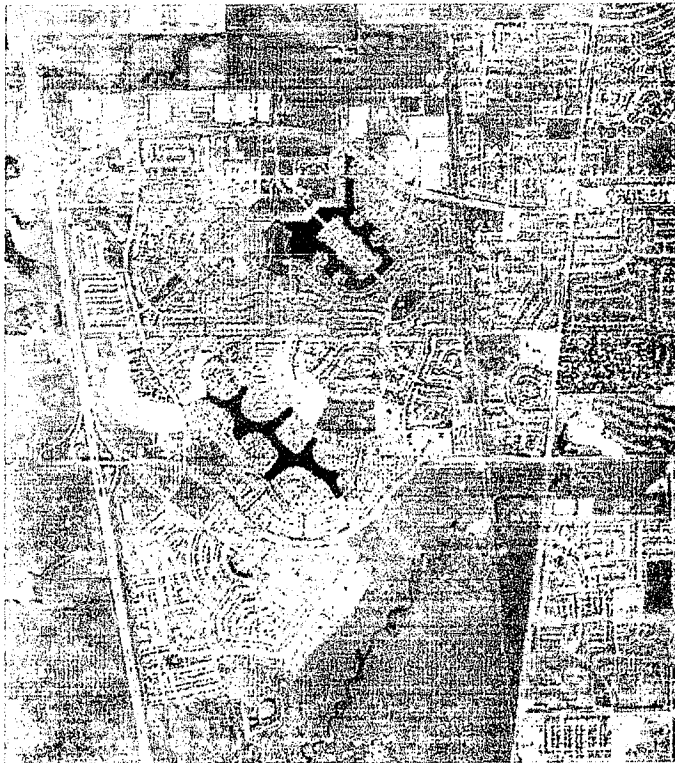
New housing development runs right up to the Stone Lakes NWR boundary. The land to the left of the road is the refuge. | Photo by Evan Hirsche

connect its isolated parcels and acquire its planned total acreage of 17,600 acres.

Developers have already bought up lands within the approved refuge boundaries, and one 460-acre subdivision was built within the boundary in 1999. And now this frenzied development has reached the refuge doorstep: the newly incorporated city of Elk Grove—the second-fastest growing city in the United States among cities of 100,000 people or more—directly abuts the refuge's eastern border. More development at the gates means the refuge will confront diminished water quality, invasive plants and other human-caused disturbance.

More people also means more refuge visitation. Refuge manager Tom Harvey welcomes the interest in the refuge, but the demand for access “creates a tension between restoring habitats and allowing wildlife to rediscover these new areas versus opening them to visitors.” When habitats have been restored, wildlife usage has increased.

There are “glimmers of hope,” says Harvey, in the onslaught of development. Some area farmers who opposed establishing the refuge now appreciate its utility as a buffer between agricultural lands and urban encroachment. (One of the most vocal opponents subsequently sold his farmland to the refuge.) In fact, traditional farming practices on the lands around the refuge benefit species such as the Swainson's hawk, greater sandhill crane, and many other migratory birds. Still, Stone Lakes has its work cut out as development closes in on this key migratory and wildlife corridor.



Subdivisions in Elk Grove, California, encroach on Stone Lakes NWR. The development below the curved road was built within the refuge acquisition boundary. | Photo by USFWS